The War in Ukraine

written by Carl Mirra | August 9, 2023

I met 73-year-old Zoya Apostoliuk in July 2022 at her home in Irpin while conducting oral history interviews in Ukraine. This affable woman, who relied on a medical cane to walk, had to climb mounds of rubble to enter her home because it had been destroyed by Russian artillery. She recounted how Russian tanks terrorized her town as well as nearby Bucha and Hostomel. Irpin is a short drive to the capital, Kyiv, that Russia attempted to conquer in February/March 2022, but failed in part because of the courageous, resilient people in these suburban enclaves.[1] Zoya was composed throughout our interview. She cried, however, recalling a story about her Russian friends calling her and her neighbors "Banderites" [Nazis].

It is at once obvious that Zoya is not a far-right Banderite. Her relatives were in the throes of Russian disinformation. As we shall see, similar misinformation is offered in the recent book by Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies, *War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict*. They mention "neo-Nazis," "right-wing nationalist," "extreme right," and "neo-fascist" to describe Ukrainian politics at least 51 times in a 182-page book, or on average once every three and a half pages. The Right Sector and Svoboda are mentioned at least 25 times. The only other political party mentioned is Servant of the People, noting it as the title of Zelensky's television program and political party. This foregrounding of right-wing extremists throughout this book obfuscates the historical record and typifies the authors' penchant to substitute caricature for nuanced analysis.

Another way the authors obscure history is by their staggering assertion that the United States, Britain, and Eastern Europe are the "most hard-core proponents of Ukraine's non-negotiable—although *non-existent—territorial integrity*" (italics mine, 179). To classify Ukraine's territorial integrity as non-existent is to propel one of Russia's most contemptible imperial narratives. In December 1991, more than 92 percent of Ukrainians voted to reaffirm its independence, including approximately 80 percent in Luhansk and Donetsk as well as some 54 percent in Crimea.[2] Russia is also a signatory to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, under which Ukraine surrendered its nuclear arsenal, but was provided assurances to uphold its internationally-recognized territorial integrity.

Zoya Apostoliuk at her home in Irpin destroyed by Russian troops.

Methodology or U.S.-Centric Polemics and Russian Apologia?

Taken together—that Ukraine is dominated by Nazis and that its territorial integrity is non-existent—illustrate that this book is not only detached from the local expertise and experience, but it—unintentionally or not—favors Russian disinformation narratives.

The text is largely unconcerned with the nuances of regional geopolitical dynamics. The authors do not mention any methodological approach or conceptual framework, leaving themselves open to the charge that they have written polemics disguised as a fair-minded attempt to "search for the truth" amidst the "blizzard of propaganda" so as to "help the people of Ukraine to restore peace to their country and their lives" (13). Few Ukrainians will find solace in Benjamin and Davies' framing of Ukraine as dominated by far-right extremists, lacking territorial integrity, with a population that is "unwittingly caught in a perfect storm" between Russia and the West.

The authors' U.S.-centric framework prioritizes U.S. strategy over detailed analysis of Ukrainian-Russian relations. Benjamin and Davies leap over Moscow's irredentist motives, and find themselves stumbling uncomfortably into apologia for Russian imperialism. Despite repeated disclaimers that Russia's invasion was illegal and "indefensible," what follows is in fact a defense of Moscow. "We disagree," they write, "that Putin was using NATO as a pretext for his imperial plans….Without NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders and its history of aggression, we doubt that Russia would have invaded Ukraine" (99). Herein is what legal scholars call the doctrine of provocation, or the "provocation plea" to obtain a reduced punishment.[3] It holds that the wrongdoing of another party (the victim) serves as a partial excuse or justification for a violent offense in such a way that it lessens the perpetrators' moral and legal culpability. It argues that the perpetrators' wrongdoing was necessary to an extent. Benjamin and Davies try to guard against the sensitive topic that their arguments serve as Russian apologia. Katrina vanden Heuvel, who contributed the preface to the book, suggests that she, the authors, and others who argue that NATO played a "precipitating role" in Russia's invasion are victims who have been "marginalized, slurred, even demonized" (6).

Stating that one is attacked for holding a position does not clarify one's defense against charges of making excuses for Russia. The only clarification offered is that the partial provocation argument is instead "informed analysis." What exactly constitutes informed analysis? What explanatory model is

employed to distinguish between "informed analysis" vs. justifying the invasion? What makes "informed analysis" distinct from a partial provocation plea? The only "explanation" provided is an endnote that cites a lecture from realist scholar John Mearsheimer, who does explain his framework. It includes that the U.S. "is principally responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis" and presents an "existential threat" to Russia. Benjamin and Davies likewise assert the United States and NATO were "instigators" of the "broader geopolitical conflict" (19). To assert a party "instigated" a conflict and cite Mearsheimer's judgment that the party most responsible for the crisis is Washington is to provide a justification. Nowhere do the authors clarify how one party is simultaneously the "principal" cause of an event, yet not in any way being blamed for causing the event. In this way, the book appears to lack transparency regarding its intent.

In short, this book is not an informed analysis with a coherent methodology. It lacks nuanced vocabulary, contains decontextualized assertions, and employs sweeping generalizations. Three broad thematic fallacies impede the book's credibility. These are that Ukrainian politicians and citizens are undermined by the outsized influence of Nazi extremists; the Ukrainian people are "unwitting" pawns in great power competition, and that Ukraine's territorial integrity is questionable. The book is not a serious work of scholarship, and regional experts are likely to find it superficial.

The remainder of this review will take up some of the "key" questions that Benjamin and Davies set out to clarify. Length precludes going through each one of the book's many misrepresentations.

What Happened in 2014?

The complex events of 2013-2014 entailed a popular uprising known as Maidan or the Revolution of Dignity. It led to the ouster of Ukraine's president Viktor Yanukovych, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and Moscow's instigation of open warfare in Donbas.

Benjamin and Davies' portrayal of Maidan exemplifies their tendency for decontextualized caricatures. They claim that the far-right group, Svoboda, "took a leading role in the Maidan protests and the overthrow of the Yanukovych government" (30). While "a broad-based movement" with crowds of up to 800,000 protested at Maidan, it was Svoboda leader Oleh Tyahnybok, who "declared a revolution was taking place" (33). And, "in reality the final execution of the coup against Yanukovych owed much to Ukraine's extreme right, the transition to power in Kyiv was not a revolution," but a rotation of oligarchs (43).

Of special importance is that Benjamin and Davies, self-identified progressives, make no attempt to explore the diverse perspectives at Maidan, especially the role of left movements. It was indeed a mass movement against Yanukovych's corruption and militarized police violence. The regime's violent attack on protestors brought out parents, college students, whole families, and ordinary people who rallied around the slogan, "We will protect our children." A leading ethnographic study of Maidan observes that Yanukovych's authoritarian rule and brutality motivated people to take part in Maidan, "and in bringing leftists' ideas to the forefront of the protests, where they were accepted and even embraced by a significant majority of protestors."[4] Leftist groups challenged not only Yanukovych's corrupt regime, but also more generally the maldistribution of wealth. They also debated whether the desired agreement with the European Union would provide economic liberation. In fact, progressive forces asserted that "We provide the content of Maidan!" Benjamin and Davies' centering of Maidan around right-wing figures (or masterminded by Washington) not only silences these left voices that attempted to highlight their "content," but also minimizes the agency of hundreds of thousands of people disgusted with Yanukovych's rule.

In spite of the violence, Maidan was also, in the words of scholar Yaroslav Hrytsak, "full of love," a

"revolution with a human face." Benjamin and Davies appear unable to look at Ukrainian faces and avoid an examination of the "content" of Maidan, having failed to even mention that it was called the Revolution of Dignity. The narrative instead features an assemblage of undignified extremists, "foot soldiers" who carried torches and praised Stephan Bandera. In this way, Benjamin and Davies strip Maidan of its dignity, a dignity related to deeper values rooted in a desire to finally forge a more democratic society that breaks free from the lingering fatalistic, distrusting Soviet mindset. In his work with the *Nestorivs'ka groupa* (Nestor Group), Hrytsak asserted that revolution was "imminent" in Spring 2013 based in part on the World Values Survey that indicated a shift in Ukrainian mindsets. There was a "high priority," according to the survey, on tolerance of others, and "rising demands for participation in decision-making in economic and political life." Sociologist Victoria Bryndza's declaration that because of Maidan "we have changed," adds complexity to this values orientation.[5] Fatalistic thinking was gradually yielding to a new generation with a more participatory, democratic orientation. War, of course, impedes this transition insofar as it imposes a survival state and threat-based mindset.

However, *The New Ukrainian School*, Ukraine's conceptual principles for education reform, complements and extends the values that Benjamin and Davies' overlook at Maidan and in Ukrainian civil society. Official education reform measures seek a "pedagogy of partnership" to foster trust between teachers, students, and parents with schools organized around respect for human rights and democracy. In short, Benjamin and Davies' portrayal of Ukrainian society through the lens of far-right movements as the driver of Ukrainian politics obscures this process of democratization. Benjamin and Davies' foregrounding of far-right militants risks legitimizing Russia's storyline about Ukraine needing "denazification," a narrative that contributes to ongoing conflict. It is surprising that the peace-minded authors missed the opportunity to illuminate the democratic movements at Maidan that sought a more equitable and harmonious society.

Was There a Coup?

Something similar occurs with the description of Yanukovych's removal. Recall that the impetus for the protests was that Yanukovych rescinded his commitment to the European Association Agreement in November 2013 because Russia was pressuring him to join the Eurasian Customs Union. Eventually his iron-handed crackdown on protestors led to much of the population desiring his removal. Benjamin and Davies again blur the faces of millions of Ukrainians and try to turn our attention to how U.S. officials allegedly choreographed and staged a coup.

The evidence for this coup, we are told, is an intercepted phone call between then U.S. assistant secretary of state Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt. Nuland "was deeply involved in the coup against Yanukovych" (71). It was odd, the authors believe, that their "regime change" plot included then Vice President Biden whose "behind-the-scenes" dealings remain "largely unexplored." But there was no secret operation, nor was there anything unusual in Nuland mentioning Biden on the call. His interactions with Yanukovych were announced publicly by the U.S. government and featured in global news reports for months. Benjamin and Davies set the stage as if a clandestine, cloak-and-dagger operation was launched in the phone call. Its contents reflected very well-known, publicized events at the time.

The intercepted phone call between Nuland and Pyatt discussed supporting Yatsenyuk as prime minister and may seem suspicious at first glance. A closer look at the timeline dispels the myth. First, Yatsenyuk was one of three opposition leaders who were for months negotiating with Yanukovych, so there was nothing exceptional about the phone call mentioning him. The call occurred on January 27. A couple of days earlier—*before* Nuland's call—Yanukovych had already proposed that Yatsenyuk serve as his prime minister. This agreement was reaffirmed during overnight negotiations February 20-21 in the presence of the foreign ministers of France, Germany,

and Poland and Russia's representative. In fact, President Obama called Putin later on February 21 (as did Yanukovych during the negotiations that agreed that Yatsenyuk should serve as PM), and the Russian leader agreed to "working with the opposition." An alleged agreement was reached in which Obama was to deter protestors from Kyiv and Putin was to convince Yanukovych to pull back police forces. Putin claims Obama betrayed him and somehow "allowed" protestors to overthrow Yanukovych, but also admitted that he did not keep his end of the bargain.[6] "I told [Yanukovych] don't withdraw the security forces," but he did anyway and fled, according to Putin.[7] The truth is that politicians and police from Yanukovych's Party of Regions' began defecting in large numbers. The real cause of Yanukovych's downfall, of course, was the massive protests against his corruption, repressive laws, and police violence, not only at Maidan but also in the east, including among some separatists as we shall see. Consider, for example, that months before Yanukovych fled, stickers appeared throughout Maidan that read, "I'm not leaving until Yanukovych resigns." The "only thing that could stop the protest movement is the dissolution of parliament," a participant's diary read on Thursday, February 20, reflecting the political atmosphere at the time.[8]

A Kremlin policy paper in summer 2013, months before the first protestors arrived at Maidan, recognized this internal political climate against Yanukovych. "With a negative attitude of the vast majority of voters," the document states, "it will be extremely difficult for Yanukovych to retain power." Yanukovych is "fueling anti-Russian sentiment," and so "we will have to wait for the collapse of the current regime and prepare for the next 'orange' coup." The measures needed include the intensification of "all round pressure" on Yanukovych by influencing television executives, parliament, clergy, scientific and cultural centers "without giving any reason to present this activity as the hand of Moscow." And, "the personnel basis of this sociopolitical structure can be the regional leaders of Southern and Eastern Ukraine."[9]

Benjamin and Davies unwittingly juxtapose Nuland with Sergey Glazyev, who they imply exposed how Washington was funding the Ukrainian opposition (38). It is with great irony that the authors fail to mention that Glazyev was also the subject of a leaked phone call. Glazyev is a former member of the Russian parliament, the Duma, from the nationalist Rodina party, and presidential adviser to Putin from 2012-19. The Glazyev leaks and "separatist" testimony uncover that the presidential advisor was funding pro-Russian separatists and inciting protests among the personnel of Southern and Eastern Ukraine. Related leaks mention the document above that Glazyev apparently had a part in drafting. In the leaks, the Glazyev tells a member of a newly formed separatist group, whose leadership included people from the neo-Nazi Slavonic Unity group, to seize government buildings because "you will be supported."[10]

Among the personnel Moscow instigated was Pavel Gubarev, who would soon become people's governor of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). Consider first that Gubarev chastised Yanukovych who "was hated and despised not only in the Western parts of Ukraine, but also in the southeast." Benjamin and Davies see only U.S. influence and rightwing extremists in their U.S.-centric analysis of the "coup," thus ignoring the complex factors that led to Yanukovych's removal. No attention is paid to worker grievances in the east and the spike of protests in Ukraine long before Maidan, or even Russia's recognition of such contextual realities.

They also oversimplify the causes of the war. Gubarev added that "only a handful of fighters" were available in March 2014. "We did not understand," he continued, that we needed "to behave as in war." In this moment of hesitancy, Gubarev received a call from Glazyev who informed him that "he supported our actions in the anti-fascist struggle." It "breathed new strength in me"; Gubarev was now ready to behave as in war.

"Why did civil war break out in eastern Ukraine in 2014?"*

Russia's pre-war penetration of "separatist" groups was a contributing factor in the 2014 war. This infiltration is evidenced in the Glazyev Tapes, Surkov leaks, and Frolov leaks, which exposed the aforementioned Kremlin policy paper and Glazyev's involvement with it. Vladislav Surkov was Deputy Prime Minister of Russia from 2011-2013 and assistant to the President overseeing Donbas policy. He shamelessly stated that there is no Ukraine, only "Ukrainianism," a "mental disorder." The Surkov leaks unveil Russia's covert operation of bribing and threatening journalists and law enforcement, staging protests and influencing cultural and religious organizations. The leaks also display some of the foreign policy motives that complicate simple formulations like "civil war." The authors use the term "civil war" as if unaware that it is a contested descriptor. For Ukrainians the term is incendiary; for Russia it is deployed as a rhetorical weapon to maintain the fiction that it is not a party to the conflict, a stance that has undermined the possibility of a durable conflict settlement. It is also controversial because Russia's infiltration of Ukrainian society blurs the line between the pro-separatist movement's actions and Moscow stirring up discontent. The inattention to Moscow's involvement with separatists is odd for a book that purports to "clear up" the "history of Ukraine leading up to this crisis" (19).

In a section "From Regime Change to Civil War," they write that the leaders of "Russian-speaking" eastern Ukraine adopted a resolution in Kharkiv in February 2014 "questioning the legality of the steps taken by the rump parliament in Kyiv" that was a "sign of what was to come" (42). Readers are led to believe an autonomous independence movement acted alone in formulating the statement. But, even the Russian media offered a more accurate picture, reporting that Alexei Pushkov, head of the Russian state Duma International Affairs committee, and Mikhail Margelov, head of the Federation Council International Affairs Committe, were present, and "together" they drafted the resolution. Meanwhile, the governor of Kharkiv told reporters "we are not preparing to break up the country. We want to preserve it." And with all the talk of extremists, the authors somehow fail to mention that roughly a week or so later a Russian citizen from the neo-Nazi group Russian National Unity (RNE) raised the Russian flag at the Kharkiv regional administration building.[11]

Additional Russian external forces that propelled conflict include Konstantin Malofeev, a wealthy businessman with close ties to the Kremlin and far-right ideologies. He provided financial support to the separatists. The Surkov leaks reveal that Malofeev supplied a list of preferred separatist leaders to Surkov, which included Igor Girkin, a Russian citizen and a former officer of the Russian security services (FSB). Shortly after, Girkin was appointed as the Defense Minister of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, along with others from the list who received positions. With all their fuss that Nuland "handpicked" the "post-coup" government (while ignoring that Yanukovych had already made that pick), there is a conspicuous absence of exploring Moscow's picking the statelets' leadership.

In January 2014, Malofeev and Girkin traveled together to Crimea before Russia's annexation in March of that year. According to Malofeev, there was widespread discussion of uniting with Russia, and he "recommended" Sergey Aksyonov to lead Crimea, who was subsequently appointed as the head of the Republic of Crimea in April 2014. Russian journalists reported that Girkin participated directly in the annexation alongside Russian forces that Putin initially called "little green men" in an attempt to conceal Russian involvement. Russian journalist Oleg Kashin, who calls the Crimea crisis both an "annexation" (see below) and an "historical justice," describes the interaction of these operatives as Moscow's "public-private partnership."[12]

Girkin soon arrived in Slavyansk, Donetsk, with the aim of replicating the "Crimea option." However, like Gubarev, he realized that the situation in the region was relatively peaceful. In a now notorious admission, Girkin stated that his forces "triggered" the war because "no one wanted to fight." Alexander Borodai, a Russian citizen and Duma member, who calls himself a "Russian imperialist," was Malofeev's public relations consultant. He became the first Prime Minister of the DPR. In the

summer of 2014, Borodai disclosed that presidential aid Surkov "always provides the Donetsk people's republic with serious support." In Girkin's assessment, "Surkov enjoys the trust of Putin."[13]

There are two concerns here. The first is that the authors' use of the phrase "civil war" lacks nuance and requires examination of both the scholarly debates about the term and how Moscow's meddling impacts its usage. The second is that Benjamin and Davies fail to investigate the ideological underpinnings of the Kremlin's strategic aims in the east. The Surkov leaks help to show that Russia planned to re-establish the 18th century notion of Novorossiya (New Russia) in Ukraine. The plan failed because Ukrainians in six of the eight oblasts identified as being in the New Russia project displayed almost no desire to unite with Russia. It was only partially successful in the remaining Donetsk and Luhansk areas. As a result, Moscow amplified its hybrid war tactics, seeking a frozen conflict by means of destabilization through federalization in Ukraine. A grasp of these strategic maneuvers is also necessary for analyzing the peace negotiations because it informs Russia's aim to use a conflict settlement to pursue its war strategy. (If federalization allowed a Russian-controlled piece of Ukraine to block actions by the Ukrainian government, then Kyiv would essentially be subject to Russian domination.) One might argue that all states attempt to achieve their war aims at the negotiating table. However, when that strategy aims to permanently impair, if not destroy, Ukraine's sovereignty, special attention must be given to how it potentially undermines a durable conflict resolution. Benjamin and Davies' nearly complete inattention to Russia's ideological and strategic dynamics hinders their classification of the war and evaluation of negotiations as we shall see below.

Tens of thousands of Ukrainian families, like that of Pavlo Okseniuk, pictured with his twin brother, traveled to Maidan in 2013. "There are Nazis everywhere in the world, but like in Ukraine, they are a minority….Bandera is not a hero…he's a person who annoys the Russians because he fought against them."

"What role did the United States and Russia play in those pivotal and complex events, which the Western corporate media deceptively abbreviate as 'the Russian annexation of Crimea?'"**

Here again the framing of the issue misleads, and consequently produces erroneous interpretations. The authors employ vague, unsubstantiated claims to create the impression that they are uncovering how readers are being duped. In this case, the trickster is the Western corporate media. The Western media, however, is not deceptively abbreviating when using the word annexation. They are following the terminology of Ukrainians, the UN, and even Russian news reports. "In the Ukrainian

collective consciousness," writes Natalya Humenyuk who collected oral histories in the occupied peninsula, "Crimea is a wound, the beginning of war," and a "lost home" that signifies the "pain of annexation." The Moscow-based *Газета.ru* (newspaper) among others describes the Crimea annexation as, well, an annexation.[14] A UN General Assembly press release announcing the body's vote against Russia's illegal annexation used precisely that term. The international condemnation of the annexation made Russia uneasy with its use. Benjamin and Davies' casting of annexation as a corporate media deception is inconsistent with international usage but consistent with Russian officials' dislike of the term.

The book contains little detail regarding Crimea and offers broad generalizations, perhaps owing to their thematic fallacy that Ukraine's territorial integrity is non-existent. For example, they observe that in a January 1991 Crimea referendum "more than 94 percent of its people voted for independence from Ukraine." But, "when the Soviet Union finally broke up later that year, Crimea's parliament agreed to join Ukraine, overriding the expressed will of a large majority of its people, until the issue finally came to the fore again in 2014" (26). The authors hurdle past the December 1991 referendum when roughly 92 percent of Ukrainians voted for independence. In fact, 54% of voters in Crimea and more than 80% in Donetsk and the east also voted to declare Ukraine an independent, unified state. It is the authors who override the will of the Ukrainian people in ignoring that Ukrainians voted in favor of independent statehood, including a majority in Crimea.

Do Benjamin and Davies believe that Crimea rightfully belongs to Russia? By definition annexation is one state illegally seizing the territory of another. If not, why are the authors' questioning the word's suitability as a signifier? Why is there no discussion of Crimean Tartars' thoughts on the matter? There is insufficient detail to fully comprehend the authors' point in objecting to the term if they believe Russia's invasion was illegal. It is worth noting here that even Yanukovych declared that Crimea must remain part of Ukraine. Putin in 2008 commented that, "There are complicated processes going on in society in the Crimea. There are problems of the Crimean Tatars, the Ukrainian population, the Russian population, the Slavic population in general, but this is Ukraine's domestic political problem."[15] Where do the authors stand with respect to Crimea's territorial integrity if annexation is a deceptive abbreviation for Russia's conquest of the peninsula?

What Is Minsk II and Why Did it Fail? "Who and what is holding up peace talks?"*

While Russia's annexation of Crimea was still underway, Stephen Cohen, a now-deceased former professor of Russian Studies at New York University, was asked by a television reporter if Putin's military intervention was wrong. Cohen snapped back that "we don't know that Putin went into Crimea," and then accused Ukraine of disinformation. Perplexed, the reporter pressed Cohen as to whether he was claiming Russia did not intervene. Cohen explained that Russia had a naval base in Crimea so "had every right to be there." Russian troops might be "milling around" the peninsula but only to protect buildings. Of course, Putin would later admit to deploying Russian forces. Not only did Cohen provide camouflage for Putin's attempted cover-up of an illegal military intervention, he deflected attention from it by insinuating it was Kyiv's "disinformation."[16] Nonetheless, Benjamin and Davies are "especially indebted" to Cohen's "brilliant analysis" in formulating their own analysis (183-84).

Much like Cohen's appalling defense of Putin's lie, Benjamin and Davies largely disregard Russia's deceptions concerning negotiations and place blame on Ukraine. For one thing, Minsk II was negotiated after defeat at Debaltseve, which many legal scholars argue is a violation of Article 52 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (invalidating treaties procured by the use or threat of force). As a result, parts of the agreement appear to advance Russia's war aim to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty through an attempted alteration of its laws. Equally concerning is that Russia maintained that it was not a party to the conflict, a fiction that Cohen was upholding above, and one

tacitly reinforced in Benjamin and Davies' assertion that Ukraine "greatly exaggerated the role of Russian military forces" and OSCE monitors only reported "isolated support" (66). This is another assertion refuted by the record: the OSCE, only months after Minsk II was signed, condemned Russia's "unilateral and unjustified assault on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," while the Coalition of Soldiers' Mothers in Russia estimated that thousands of Russian troops had been deployed based in part on the deaths of their military sons.[17]

Related to this is the authors' belief that Zelensky "reversed the order of steps" in the Minsk II agreement. However, the agreement was vague, confusing, and contradictory, and few can agree on its sequencing. It called for the withdrawal of all foreign formations, and holding elections according to OSCE norms and Ukrainian law. The presence of foreign troops violated those norms, making it impossible to conduct a proper election. So, if Russia's troop presence was "greatly exaggerated," as Benjamin and Davies allege, perhaps those foreign forces troop levels were low enough that Putin's unreasonable claim about not being a party to the conflict was plausible. This sort of vague insinuation risks serving the foreign invading army's absurdist claim that it was somehow not involved in all this and had no obligations under Minsk. Putin maintained this fiction as late as 2021. He somehow said with a straight face that "The Minsk agreements do not state that Russia is a party to the conflict, we never agreed to this and we never will."[18] Are Russian troops just "milling about" in Ukraine as Benjamin and Davies' expert source would have us believe? Or, are they part of the foreign formations that refuse to withdraw and thereby undermine the implementation of the peace protocols?

They cite Cohen to support their contention that peace negotiations also failed because Zelensky was "confronted" by "extremists" and "abandoned his peace efforts" (65). I have previously debunked this narrative. The implication here is that Zelensky backed away from his peace mandate and followed the far right's no concessions stance. The problem is that his platform actually insisted on no territorial concessions, a view supported by the vast majority of Ukrainians, but attributed only to extremists because caricature substitutes for facts.[19]

Returning to Minsk, no sooner than the ink dried on the protocols, the pro-Russian separatists brazenly violated its provisions. Alexander Zackharchenko (who replaced Borodai as PM because the latter's Russian citizenship was a reminder that the moniker "civil war" was untenable, and that Russia was indeed a party to the conflict), openly announced several violations as reported in Russian news media. Zakharchenko refused to allow Ukrainian border guards to re-establish control of the border and broadcast that elections would be held according to "local law" in direct violation of Minsk.[20]

Benjamin and Davies also repeat the cliché that former British PM Boris Johnson and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin "effectively killed" peace talks in April 2022. A simple timeline calls this narrative too into question. *Before* Johnson's April 9 and Austin's April 25 visits with Zelensky, the Russians had already effectively killed the spirit of negotiation. Russian state-run media reported that the Duma's CIS/Eurasia Affairs committee announced that Putin would "never sit down…with such a bastard" as Zelensky. Russia also selected oligarch Roman Abramovich, under U.S. sanction, in late March as a mediator. He delivered a personal note from Zelensky to Putin on possible peace terms, and the Russian leader replied, "tell them I will crush them."[21] Against this backdrop, Zelensky was already suspicious about opening talks with Putin who had also stubbornly refused reasonable assurances regarding NATO in 2021 (see below). Benjamin and Davies do point to a reputable Ukrainian newspaper as the source for the claim that Johnson told Zelensky not to negotiate and pursue military victory.[22] But the journalist who wrote that story disputes this interpretation. Johnson was merely offering advice to Zelensky, who already was suspicious of Putin because Russia had claimed there were no troops in Crimea, that it wouldn't invade Ukraine, and so

on. One of the currents in this book is that Western diplomats are prodding Zelensky to skirt negotiations, a conclusion that again requires ignoring timelines and regional contexts as well as Russia's colonialist and combative attitude toward Ukraine.

Why did Russia Invade Ukraine? How Important Were Provocations by the West?

As noted, the authors make clear that they believe NATO provoked the crisis. Elsewhere I have detailed how the NATO-provoked-Russia-narrative is contradicted by paired examples of NATO expansion and aggression vs. Moscow's response.[23] That the Russian arms industry sold NATO countries, including the United States, arms and military helicopters and performed joint exercises only two months before Maidan also complicates the simple provocation storyline.

However, if we look more closely at the claim that Putin was trying to negotiate and his hand was forced because Washington was dangling Ukraine's entry into NATO in the Kremlin's face, we see this too is unsubstantiated. The *Moscow Times* reported in September 2021 that Biden "showed no sign of moving on requests to open NATO" to Ukraine. Zelensky wished to discuss Ukraine's chances of joining NATO, the media outlet noted. However, "Biden made clear he considers Ukraine far from ready to join." The door remains open, yet Ukraine does not meet "the daunting conditions for membership."[24]

Moreover, German chancellor Olaf Scholz characterized Russia's insistence during negotiations in the lead up to Russia's invasion that NATO prohibit Ukraine's membership as "strange" to even "raise the issue" because accession discussions were non-existent and were not on the table. The German leader also told reporters that he told Putin that Ukraine would not enter NATO "in the next 30 years."[25]

Despite these assurances that Ukraine would not join NATO for decades, if at all, Putin responded that the parties must "resolve this issue right now."[26] In other words, NATO must immediately do what Putin demands. Somehow a key NATO country's statement that Ukraine was not entering the Atlantic alliance does not temper Benjamin and Davies' insistence that Putin was provoked.

The author interviewing Oleksandra in front of her apartment building destroyed by a Russian missile. Asked what she

thought of conceding Crimea or parts of Donbas as peace "experts" like Benjamin and Davies insist, she answered, "tell them to study history"; then she exclaimed, "please help Ukraine. We are fighting for our freedom."

Conclusion

The book ends with a predictable lack of nuance. The authors state that the war was driven by the imperial ambitions of "leaders on all sides," yet they fail to explore the particularities of Russian imperialism. This is a significant conceptual flaw because that exploration would uncover the internal ideological factors (regional dominance, fears of a Moscow Maidan, restoration of Russian prestige, power, and territory from the "catastrophe" of the USSR's collapse) that exist independently from Western behavior. Readers will learn more from this book about U.S. intervention in Iraq, than about Moscow's imperial strategy and consciousness, especially with respect to Ukraine. Consider that Russia's original conflict settlement negotiator deems Ukraine a mental disorder, whereas Putin believes that "the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians" has "no historical basis."

Putin's imperial discourse was echoed in one of Russia's leading news outlets during its attack on Kyiv. Deluded policymakers and pundits believed victory was in reach. "Did someone in the old European capitals," *RIA Novosti* cynically pondered, "seriously believe that Moscow would give up Kiev?" Now that "Ukraine has returned to Russia," Putin has fulfilled his mission to restore the empire's "historical space." A week later state-controlled media announced that "Ukraine is impossible as a nation-state….[It] is an artificial anti-Russian construction."[27] It is no wonder that a majority of Ukrainians believe Russia is seeking to destroy it. This eliminationist ideology, which is prevalent in Russian discourse, is unexplored in Benjamin and Davies' account. Yet, they find the space to tell readers that "annexation" is a misleading abbreviation for Russia's seizure of Crimea, while Ukraine's territorial integrity is "non-existent." Surely, it seems reasonable to question the sincerity of their declaration that they want to "help restore peace to the people of Ukraine."

This book offers no new, original research on the war or the region, while proffering discredited interpretations. There are freshly published works available from regional experts, such as Serhii Plokhy's *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (2023), that make it pointless to read Benjamin and Davies's poorly researched commentary that the authors admit was hastily assembled "in a record two months." They clearly needed more time to "make sense" of the war and catch up for their lack of regional expertise.

Notes

* in Benjamin and Davies' words

** wording that of Benjamin and Davies

1. See also Yecheniia Podobna, *Heroic Cities of Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel* (Kharkiv, Folio, 2023).

2. C. Lapychak, "Independence," *The Ukrainian Weekly*, Dec. 8, 1991, pp. 1, 5.

3. The doctrine of provocation dates to the 12th century and a majority of US states have a common law doctrine of provocation. Commentators who couch Russia's illegal invasion as a response to NATO's existential threat as merely "informed analysis" are either being dishonest about their motives, or ignoring the logical implications of their arguments. M. Berman, "Provocation as Partial Justification and Partial Excuse," *Faculty Scholarship at Penn Carey Law*, (2011).

4. M. Shore, *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution* (Yale Univ. Press, 2017), p. 42; E. Channell-Justice, *Without the State: Self-Organization and Political Activism in Ukraine* (Univ. of Toronto Press, 2022), pp. 6-7, 113-114.

5. "Yaroslav Hrytsak: The sacrifices of the Maidan wouldn't have happened if people hadn't been full of love," Ukrainian Catholic University, Feb. 18, 2022; "Inglehart and Welzel Cultural Map" n.d.; Y. Hrytsak, "The Postcolonial is not Enough," *Slavic Review*, v. 74, n. 4 (Winter 2015), 736; V. Bryndza, "Maidan: Has something changed or not?," *Pravda*, Nov. 30, 2015.

6. "Telephone Conversation with US President Barack Obama," Feb. 22, 2014; S. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (Norton, 2023), pp. 106-108.

7. Putin interview in film *Crimea: The Way Home*, posted by Russian embassy.

8. Channell-Justice, *Without the State*, p. 115; A. Kurkov, *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev* (Penguin, 2014), p. 123.

9. "Про комплекс заходів щодо залучення України до євразійського інтеграційного процесу," *Дзеркало тижня*, Aug. 16, 2013. Scholar Sanshiro Hosaka found portions of the leaked document in the Frolov Leaks. In addition, when the media exposed it, Frolov emailed to Glazyev stating that there had been a leak.

10. H. Coynash, "Glazyev tapes debunk Russia's lies about its annexation of Crimea and undeclared war against Ukraine," *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, Feb. 2, 2019.

11. "South-East of Ukraine took over the provision of constitutional order," Interfax.ru, Feb. 22, 2014; "Leaders in east Ukraine vote to take control of their areas," Reuters, Feb. 22, 2014; Kurkov, *Ukraine Diaries*, p. 141.

12. Oleg Kashin, "From Crimea to Donbass: the adventures of Igor Strelkov and Alexander Boroday," *slon.ru* (republic.ru), May 19, 2014.

13. For full citations on Surkov, Malofeev, Girkin, and Borodai, see C. Mirra, "Not One Inch, Unless It Is from Lisbon to Vladivostok; NATO-Russia Mythmaking and a Reimagined Kyivan Rus," *Journal of Applied History* (Dec. 2022), and C. Mirra, "We are interfering: The Information War from NATO Encirclement to a Coup D'Etat," *Ukraine Analytica*, April 2023, n. 1 (30).

14. N. Humenyuk, *The Lost Island: Book of Reports from the Occupied Crimea* [in Ukrainian], (Lviv: Stary Lev Publishing House), pp. 8, 14; N. Galimova, "We are going to Russia, How I don't know: How Russia annexed Crimea," *gazeta*, March 12, 2015; "Putin tells the reason for the annexation of Crimea," *Lenta,* March 9, 2105. The article notes Putin stating his goal was not to annex but to protect Russians, but the article repeatedly uses the term annexation without disclaimers. "General Assembly adopts Resolution calling upon states not to recognize changes in the state of Crimea," UN GA/11493, March 27, 2014.

15. Evgeny Rakul and Alexander Vorobyov, "Yanukovych: Crimea must remain Ukrainian," *Vedomosti*, Feb. 28, 2014; Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin interviewed by the German ARD

TV channel, Aug. 29, 2008. I first learned of Putin's comment in Gerard Toal's work.

16. Zoe Schlanger, "The American Who Dared Make Putin's Case," *Newsweek,* March 14, 2014.

17. "OSCE Parliamentary Assembly adopts resolution condemning Russia's continued actions in Ukraine," July 8, 2015; "Thousands of Russian soldiers sent to Ukraine, says rights groups," *Guardian*, Sept. 1, 2014.

18. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, telegram channel, Nov. 13, 2021.

19. C. Mirra, "Is Zelensky afraid of the far right?" *Eurasian Review*.

20. "Zacharchenko: Local elections will be held according to the laws of the DPR," *RIA Novosti*, Feb. 14, 2014.

21. "The State Duma explained why Putin will not talk to 'scum' Zelensky," news.ru, April 5, 2022; "Roman Abramovich skirts sanctions in role as go-between," *The Times* (UK), March 28, 2022.

22. V. Artiukh and T. Fedirko, "No, the West Didn't Halt Ukraine's Peace Talks," *Novara Media*, Oct. 17, 2022.

23. Mirra, "Not One Inch," and Mirra, "We are interfering."

24. Shaun Tandon and Sebastian Smith, "Ukraine's Zelenskiy Seeks Biden's Support on NATO," *Moscow Times*, Sep. 2, 2021.

25. "Scholz stresses Ukraine support, but no weapons," *DW* (Deutsche Welle), Feb. 14, 2022; "Scholz: Putin started war for 'completely absurd' reasons," *DW*, Aug. 21, 2022.

26. "Putin said that the Russian Federation is not satisfied with the promise not to accept Ukraine into NATO," Interfax.ru, Feb. 15, 2022.

27. Timofey Sergeytsev, "What Should Russia do with Ukraine?," РИА Новости, 4 March 2022; Petr Akopov, "The offensive of Russia and the new world," RIA Novosti, Feb. 26, 2022.